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ABSTRACT

The terms "humanities" and "new technology" have a broad spectrum of meanings, which often imply a tension between two somewhat incompatible concepts. If one views humanities as the general learning that should be in the possession of all human beings and new technology as the convergence of two or more sophisticated technologies in expansive and innovative applications, one can conceive of new technologies as not only a tool for teaching the humanities, but as a part of the humanities. Such a view is important if community colleges are to avoid turning out skilled technicians without perspective, without a sense of ethics or human values, who cannot and do not think. Many current models of curricular planning for occupational education focus strictly on identifying fast-growing sectors of the economy and the emerging occupations and skills for which there is greatest demand and developing programs and training students to fill these demands. In doing so, these models fail to address the real occupational outlook problems: the lack of jobs and competition for employment. An alternative planning model focuses on developing the skills that will best serve persons in areas of employment opportunity: independence, flexibility, creativity, and mastery of words and numbers--the ageless goals of humanities education. Community college educators must find the balance between short-term business demands and long-term student needs and ensure that humanities education has increasing prominence in an era of new technology. (LAL)

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"The Humanities in an Era of New Technology: Variations on a Theme"

by

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Presented to the League for Innovation
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Once--just once--in my lifetime, I hope that I will be asked to address the topic of "Technology in an Era of New Humanity." Since that happy day has not yet arrived, let me build upon some of Dr. Eaton's remarks and introduce some variations on her theme.

Let me begin by defining my terms. Both "humanities" and "new technology" have a broad spectrum of meanings. The humanities can be narrowly defined to refer to those branches of learning marked by a distinct cultural character and usually including languages, literature, mathematics, and philosophy. This definition has its roots in the classical trivium and quadrivium, and it is not the definition that I intend to use. More broadly, and more commonly now, we define the humanities as Mortimer Adler does in The Paideia Proposal as "signifying the general learning that should be in the possession of all human beings."[1] It is learning characterized by and focused upon human attributes and qualities. When I speak of the humanities, it is in this context.

"New technology" is another very confusing catch-phrase. It creates images of computers, chips, electronics, robots, and the like. When I use the term, I am referring to the convergence of two or more sophisticated technologies in expansive and innovative applications. For educators, the marriage of communications technology with data processing technology is the "new technology" of greatest interest. While the topic "The Humanities in an Era of New Technology" seems to imply tension between two somewhat incompatible concepts, I hope my definitions make clear that I see no such tension. In fact, given the broad definition of humanities used by Adler and others, the new technologies may not only be a tool for teaching the humanities, but may be part of the humanities. If the distinguishing

characteristic of humanities education is the process by which we teach, rather than the content which we teach, then technologies can be "humanities," and conversely, music or literature or art can be taught as technical skills, with no humanities perspective whatsover. So I find the implied dichotomy an artifical one, and one that I will try not to perpetuate in my remarks.

The Role of the Humanities

The topic "Humanities is an Era of New Technology" is based on the implicit assumption, I think, that as community colleges address the realities of the new technology, significant shifts in the role of humanities will be demanded. I would venture that the function of the humanities as an aspect of community college education will not change at all, although we may attach more (or, heaven forbid) less importance to that function.

I believe that the basic role of the humanities has remained constant since the time of Aristotle. The essential function of the humanities has been to communicate, through various disciplines, the simultaneous universality and absolute uniqueness of the human experience. Thus the humanities provide us with insights about ourselves and paths to self-fulfillment, with insights about the world in which we live, and with insights into social and ethical issues which will confront us as workers and as citizens. The humanities also offer learning for learning's sake, not as a means to some specific end.[2]

Think for a moment about the importance of an educational approach which emphasizes connections and the value of individuals. In an era when technology will undoubtedly make it possible for us to shop, work, and study alone, in an era marked by increased pluralism and fragmentation, such an approach is raised to a new level of importance. It will be essential if

we are to maintain balance and perspective as we learn to use our new tools wisely and well. The new technologies may be so potent that they will free us from the great demands for technical expertise. The development of artificial intelligence--self-adjusting machines--is advancing very rapidly. Auto repair may be largely reduced to replacement of simple components. Computer programming may be done entirely by computers. We may have to reconceive our notions of how humans work best and the special and unique contributions that humans--and humans alone--can make. Then what kind of learning will we need?

We must remember that the new technology is just that--a technology, a tool, a means to an end and not an end in itself. It will still be human judgment that determines the uses, for good or ill, of our powerful new tools. And this judgment, this perspective that thinks in terms of human consequences, is tempered, if not created, in the pursuit of the humanities.

As a community college educator, I am ever-mindful that the perspective provided by the humanities is essential for everyone, not just for those who "would be king." For many of our students, higher education stops with us. If we provide skills without perspective, without a sense of ethics and of human values, we are shirking a major role as educators in social responsibility. In our quest to "put America back to work," to enter a "high tech" world, and to provide linkages with business and industry, we may unwittingly play a major role in turning out skilled technicians who cannot and do not think, who fear to question, and who will simply be following orders when they help create the synthetic virus or push the "red alert" button or intall electronic eavesdropping devices.

This argument for the continued and enhanced role of the humanities is a jaded one, from the perspective that the humanities provide a means

for us and our students to live intelligently and responsibly as citizens in a democracy. But it is nonetheless an urgent justification, as I was reminded the other evening as I watched, for perhaps the third time, a program in Jacob Bronowski's Ascent of Man series.

The segment is entitled "Knowledge and Certainty"--some of you undoubtedly remember it. It concludes with Bronowski standing by a pond at Auschwitz, silhouetted against a grey, unforgiving sky. Into this pond were flushed the ashes of four million Jews, victims not of the technology that enabled their annihilation, but of the narrow, certain, inhumanity of their persecutors. The humanities are uncertain. They question. They provoke. They stimulate knowledge, judgment, even wisdom. They offer our most powerful educational tool to assure that there will never be another Auschwitz, where the gentle, strong Bronowski waded, fully clothed, into a still pond to scoop up a fistful of silt composed of the flesh and bones of his fellows.

There is no more potent justification for the emphasis of humanities education in an era of new technology.

One of the most cogent arguments for emphasis of the humanities in our new era is presented in a recent article entitled "The Economy and the College Student," written by economist W. Ed Whitelaw.[3] Whitelaw's perspective is strictly economic, and in economic terms alone, emphasis upon the humanities will be essential if we are to serve our students well in an era of new technology. I recommend the article highly, and I will try to summarize its well-made points.

First, Whitelaw observes, curricular planning for occupational education is based on some heroic and untenable assumptions. You all know the planning model to which he refers, for I suspect it is the one that most of us use. It has five stages:

1. Identify the fastest-growing sectors of the economy.

2. In these sectors, identify the emerging occupations and specialized skills for which demand is fastest-growing.

3. Develop curricula that train students in the target occupations and skills.

4. Train the students.

5. Send them out to assume jobs.

In the high tech era, with our zeal to keep pace and serve the needs of business and industry, we have put this model into high gear.

It is based on these unstated assumptions:

1. that the economy is so firmly segmented both industrially (i.e., by sector) and regionally that one may consider it piece-by-piece without considering what is going on in the economy as a whole;

2. that the occupations and specialized skills for which demand is expected to grow fastest are peculiar to the fastest growing industries;

3. that occupational diversification is a good thing and implies acquiring the specialty most in demand; and

4. that the implementation of specialized curricula and education of students in them can and will take place more rapidly than fluctuations in demand for these specialized skills.

Whitelaw's description of programs built on these assumptions is too good to summarize. He says:

> The trouble with programs built upon these assumptions is that they cannot work, for they are too slow and they squint. They identify the need for a job, say 573 buttonhole design engineers by 1985; spend two years conceiving and implementing a highly specialized course of study--only elephants have longer gestation periods than academics--; and by the time they have produced their first generation of perfectly trained and certified buttonhole-design engineers, zippers are back in style.

In his article, Whitelaw presents a view of the economy that doesn't squint, and which reads the front page before flipping to the classifieds.

After analyzing economic indicators, he concludes that the fundamental factor in the 1980s will be a lack of jobs. As educators, we are busily concerning ourselves with "a perceived mismatch between the new high-tech specialized skills needed to win jobs in emerging industries and the skills we actually teach our students." These discussions miss the point: the real occupational outlook problem is with the "level of demand for labor, not with the composition of demand."

Our typical patterns of training for new technologies assume that the identified fields will offer "plentiful opportunities throughout a career, improving chances for promotion and variety in jobs throughout an active life." This logic is flawed, for the real problem will be lack of demand, and competition for jobs will be between the well-trained and the less well-trained. As Whitelaw observes, "If our responsibility is solely to those students each of us is teaching today, then we must train them to win the scarce jobs away from their competitors, i.e., the students we taught in the past and the students whom our colleagues taught elsewhere. How, then, do we serve our students? If instead of asking what jobs lie over the horizon and then setting about training ever so many students for them, we ask where in the present and foreseeable economy is there room to maneuver and what kind of person is most likely to prosper in these areas of opportunity, then we will design a very different kind of program, one with some chance of success."

Not surprisingly, the "very different kind of program with some chance of success" is firmly grounded in the humanities. No single magic skill or competency once acquired--even in the new technologies--will guarantee employment. Thus we must teach toward independence, flexibility, creativity, and mastery of words and numbers--the ageless goals of humanities education.

Whitelaw justifies liberal education "as a means of enabling individuals to live effectively as employees and employers, buyers and sellers, consumers and producers in a market-oriented economy." If we as educators are truly to serve our students in an era of new technology, we must advise them in directions which will maximize occupational choice, not limit it to a narrow specialty soon outmoded. We must help them in acquiring and enhancing skills of quantitative analysis and skills of expression. We must think beyond job security and toward employment security. We must give them the tools to compete for limited jobs and to at least manage occupational destinies that will be buffeted by the winds of a stormy economy. We must help prepare them for whatever comes, not for "lobotomized security in the button factory."

As community college educators, we must be mindful of the balance between the training needs of society and the educational needs of students. These are not one in the same, and to serve either exclusively is to serve both poorly. We must find the balance between short-term business demands and long-term student needs and strive to achieve it.

How are we to do this? The first requirement is courage. We must be willing to stand behind our convictions and translate them into curricular decisions that demonstrate our commitment to students. We must be willing to defend the inclusion of English, mathematics, speech, and human development in programs that train students for the era of new technology. As educators, we must develop and maintain standards that do not waver in the face of industrial demands. We must commit ourselves to instilling in our students learning that will last long after the industrial demand has faded.

From a social, political, economic, and ethical standpoint, humanities education should have increasing prominence in an era of new technology.

And just as the humanities can help provide perspective and balance in a technological age, so can applications of the new technology enhance humanities education. The possibilities for dramatically different and more effective pedagogies in the humanities are limitless...and a worthy topic for a future conference!

Footnotes

[1]Adler, Mortimer. The Paideia Proposal. (New York: MacMillan, 1982), np.

[2]Cahn, Steven M. "Rethinking Requirements," The College Board Review, Winter 1981-82, p. 10.

[3]Whitelaw, W. Ed. "The Economy and the College Student," Current Issues in Higher Education: Liberal Learning and Career Preparation, 1982-83, Number 2, pp. 4-11.

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